

The Sea Serpent of Regent Street: On the Evidentiary Strategies of Nineteenth-Century Exhibitions

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ABSTRACT Much of the heterogeneity of London's exhibitionary culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can be attributed to the increasing geographical range of sources from which its objects were culled. Spaces of exhibition during this period constituted places of epistemic tethering, where long chains of transportation and communication, which extended out into the world, finally came aground. Questions of authenticity, provenance, and origin were implicated in a particularly acute way in this period, spurring new evidentiary practices. This essay explores these practices by juxtaposing two exhibits, separated by about twenty years, and consisting of dramatically disparate materials. One was a Spanish Baroque altarpiece, exported under the duress of war, which arrived with only the written testimonies of various intermediaries to attest to its authenticity. The second, a natural history specimen proclaimed as a mythical "sea serpent," appeared with a far more elaborate evidentiary ensemble, including engravings and paintings, as well as the presence of the fisherman who had caught the beast. The ways in which these two events sought to persuade their viewers, and the responses they evoked, help to illuminate some of the central contradictions of evidence and belief within this exhibitionary culture. **KEYWORDS:** Exhibitions; evidence; authenticity; natural history; painting; testimony; display

☞ **THE HETEROGENEITY OF LONDON'S EXHIBITIONARY CULTURE** is vividly on display in the array of studies in this issue. The challenge of this variety to the historian is daunting, particularly if one hopes to assess this culture as a whole. Doing so requires discerning some overarching discursive frames amid this multifariousness, the regular dimensions with which a range of exhibitors concerned themselves. One potentially revealing approach draws upon a structural feature of this variety's emergence: the wide geography of sources from which objects were culled, and the evidentiary challenges that this vastness produced.

As the scope of imperial discovery and empirical knowledge expanded in concert, the chain of custody between an object in situ and its ultimate rendering up for exhibition was elongated. Increasingly, the integrity of the whole depended on growing numbers of links—local “savages,” mercenary mariners, and sensationalistic publishers, among others—who lacked the kind of social prestige that might once have sufficed to attest to veracity.¹ Nor were they necessarily possessed of professional expertise, a more recently conceived and powerful source of authority.² Without these warrants, new evidentiary practices were necessary to provide the assurances sought by audiences in a competitive marketplace.³ As a result, for all but the most local objects on display, exhibitors were obliged to fashion evidentiary structures that acknowledged these challenges of transmission and reconciled with them. In these milieux, problems of authenticity, provenance, and origin were increasingly bound up with the consequential issue of who might be permitted to participate in the making of truth claims about the world beyond the horizon.

The epistemological challenges that confronted exhibitors cannot be isolated from the more expansive evidentiary culture of which they were a part. Indeed, it is revealing to note how prominently questions about evidence and its transmission figured in a range of contemporary discourses. In law, the first quarter of the century was characterized as the “springtide” of the modern evidence system.⁴ A constellation of changes in evidence signal the shifting ground, at the center of which was the erosion of the long-reigning doctrine of “best evidence.” Instead of excluding from consideration all but the most tightly certified evidence, as had been done in the previous century, legal theorists now promulgated the admission of an extraordinary range of evidence. In advocating this, Jeremy Bentham’s *Treatise on Judicial Evidence* (1825), the most significant text of the period, stood the conventional view on its head.⁵ This shift constituted “the beginning of the modern approach to the field of evidence,” driving “the development of rules to facilitate the admission of evidence

1. The role of gentlemanly honor in determining the probity of witnesses in an earlier era is explored in Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

2. On the development of new models of expertise in the nineteenth century, see Alex Csiszar, *The Scientific Journal: Authorship and the Politics of Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

3. The concept of a marketplace has proven especially useful in understanding the operations of “popular” venues, for it implies the centrality of the choices made by consumers among competing options, as well as the strategies of the exhibitors who sought to attract a burgeoning audience. See Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman, eds., *Science in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century Sites and Experiences* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

4. John Henry Wigmore, “A General Survey of the History of the Rules of Evidence,” *Select Essays in Anglo-American Legal History* 2 (1908): 695.

5. Jeremy Bentham, *A Treatise on Judicial Evidence* (London, 1825), 192. This tome was itself a crystallization of the author’s five-volume *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*, written over the course of a decade.

of almost every sort.”⁶ Bentham’s axiom was “more evidence, and that better.”⁷ As the venue where this new flood of evidence would be aired, the courtroom emerged as the preeminent forum for evaluating evidence and probing witnesses.

To facilitate this expanded evidentiary encounter, Bentham rejected the superiority traditionally accorded to written evidence over oral. He writes, “Take a witness, who cannot hear a single question, who can give no explanation beyond his first statement, whose countenance is veiled so that you have no exterior sign by which to judge his thoughts; and the deposition of such a witness, deaf, blind, and dumb, will have precisely the same value as written evidence.”⁸ By likening written evidence to a witness without sensory capacities, Bentham both diminishes the evidentiary prowess of text and elevates evidence derived from the senses. The primacy of vision, in particular, can be seen undergirding the rules of evidence in maritime law, an area especially linked with the epistemic challenges of a seagoing empire.

In a chapter entitled “On the Competency of a Marine Witness,” the author of one treatise offered a hypothetical situation in which the triers of fact were transported to the scene of an imminent collision of two vessels: “Suppose a Judge, advocates, and jurymen of sufficient number to try an issue at law were on board a ship, A., which was to pass another vessel, B.” Those gentlemen, unless they were also, providentially, able seamen, could never maneuver the craft in time, “nor, indeed, could the senior wrangler of mathematics, at the University.” A certain variety of visual acuity—“nautical skill and a quick apprehension”—was required in a credible witness. Accordingly, “in such cases, the judgment of the Court must, in a great measure, be guided by the practical knowledge, as well as the veracity, of an ocular witness.”⁹ To deny the utility of such witnesses would limit “number of facts that could be collected,” which “in comparison with the necessities of justice [are] only a drop in the ocean.”¹⁰

Viewed alongside this changing evidentiary environment, one can identify several important parallels in the contemporaneous exhibition culture. Over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, exhibition spaces in London furnished increasingly multimodal evidentiary apparatuses, incorporating a multiplicity of testimonial and evidentiary resources, of physical specimens, scientific reports, and artistic representations. In these milieux, audiences were not obliged to rely upon any one type of source in making their assessments of the wonders on display.

6. Stephan Landsman, “From Gilbert to Bentham: The Reconceptualization of Evidence Theory,” *Wayne Law Review* 36, no. 3 (1990): 1175.

7. Bentham, *A Treatise*, 593.

8. Bentham, *A Treatise*, 198.

9. Frederick Miles Van Heythuysen, *An Essay Upon Marine Evidence, in the Courts of Law and Equity, in Which Is Considered the Competency of a Marine Witness, the Legal Title to British Ships, the Proof and Construction of a Ship’s Policy, and the Evidence Necessary to Establish a Variety of Nautical Subjects: To Which Is Added a Glossary of Sea Terms, Which Frequently Occur in Marine Pleadings* (London, 1819), 2, 4.

10. Bentham, *A Treatise*, 128.

A frequent feature of these exhibitions was the presence of “witnesses,” who enjoyed privileged empirical relationships to the items on display. These individuals could recount their experiences and submit to cross-examination by audiences. And these interactions could be reciprocally empowering: the audience could conduct its own investigations, and the non-elite witnesses could speak with an authority that derived from firsthand experience rather than from expert knowledge.

This essay describes the historical specificity of these epistemic activities. It does so by demonstrating how exhibitors sought to assure their audiences of the integrity of the transmission of the objects on display back to the metropole of London. This required broadening the range of acceptable guarantors to encompass those who lacked traditional kinds of prestige but who enjoyed proximity to and experience with the objects on show. And this expansion, a necessity of a distended terrain, modeled a participatory exhibition culture, one in which the empirical experience of the public within the exhibitionary space itself was increasingly elevated.

✎ Forging the Chain of Custody

The Cosmorama Rooms, situated in Regent Street, in the heart of London’s densest exhibitions district, served as an emporium of everything. The enclave’s diversity of offerings represented a full menu ranging from anomalies such as the “porcupine boy” suffering from ichthyosis of the skin (1841) to Zulus transported from South Africa (1850).¹¹ The star of the 1849 season was a provincial arrival enticingly advertised as the “Wonder of the Sea,” and possibly constituting physical evidence of the mythical sea serpent. Pulled from the depths off the northeast coast of England in March, the desiccating creature was paraded around the fishing villages of Northumbria on a plank for days, shedding its shimmering argentate scales. When the specimen was finally conveyed to a state of liquid preservation by local naturalists, they declared it a new species of an obscure genus, lavishing upon the beast a taxonomic tongue-twister: *Gymnetrus northumbricus*. The creature was a participant in a sea serpent craze of the late 1840s, and slowly made its way to the capital, where it seized the imagination of theatrical impresarios and baffled scientific elites.¹²

The display of the supposed sea serpent was, in some ways, characteristic of the metropolitan cultures of exhibition in this period. Like many of its competitors, the show in the Cosmorama Rooms purposely sowed doubt about its own veracity. It deployed what Neil Harris called the “operational aesthetic,” in which the audience’s

11. “Wonderful Production of Nature: Greatest Human Curiosity! Now in Existence, Master Thomas Jones, the Cambrian Porcupine Youth!!” July 6, 1841, Wellcome Collection, London; “Master Thomas Jones, the Cambrian Porcupine Youth,” Humans, box 3 (39), Frog and Porcupine Men, John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; and “Zulu Kaffirs,” Humans, box 4 (82), Primitive People, John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

12. On sea serpents in Victorian culture, see Sherrie Lynne Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits, and Skulls: Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age* (State University of New York Press, 2010), 17–50.

skepticism was courted and commodified.¹³ Witness a “romance” divided roughly between interminable serpentine doggerel and assiduously learned zoological appendixes. The playful verse injected a note of ambivalence: “Sometimes I believe, and sometimes I doubt, if there is such a beast as I’m writing about; yet this I will leave to your own common sense, for you are safe on this question to be on the fence.”¹⁴ The exhibitors also furnished their punters with a multiplicity of testimonial and evidentiary resources, a multimodal approach that seems to have been increasingly necessary in this competitive environment. As we shall see, the authenticity of the “wonder of the sea” was attested by physical specimens, but also by painted representations, scientific reports, and written eyewitness accounts. These resources were of variable persuasiveness, a disparity that fueled the fires of skepticism even as they represented the accumulation of more evidence.

But the exhibition was also distinctive. It sought to register the chain of custody through which its main offering had passed, within the representational and epistemological logic of the exhibition itself. Jennifer Roberts has astutely noted that many visual representations of this era have the qualities of phatic language, elements that “are performative acknowledgments of the channel of communication itself, rather than referential or descriptive utterances that convey the content of a message.”¹⁵ This is an exhibition engrossed, at every level, in the drama of its own transmission, anxiously naturalizing the reporting systems upon which its existence depends.

This approach is crystalized in a handbill—a triumph of Victorian advertising puffery—announcing the beast’s arrival in the heart of the city for public consumption and encrusted with a variety of evidentiary claims (figure 1).¹⁶ An engraving of the sea serpent in aquamarine shows an amiably grinning creature undulating atop the surf, oblivious to the vessel in pursuit. The presence of that craft serves implicitly to certify the origins of the specimen on display. In this and virtually all other images of the sea serpent in the illustrated press, the zoological wonder is seen alongside the vessel from which it is nominally sighted (figure 2). This visual strategy clarifies that the viewpoint of the image is plainly *not* that of the mariners aboard the ship. Even when a caption asserts that the representation depicts “the sea-serpent when first seen from HMS *Daedalus*,” the juxtaposed image betrays this impossibility by also including the *Daedalus* itself and its inquisitive crew glimpsing the creature.¹⁷ The

13. Neil Harris, *Humbug: the Art of P. T. Barnum* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), chapter 3.

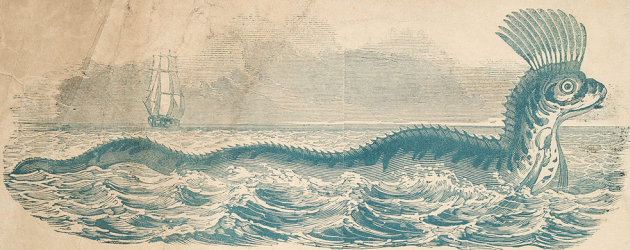
14. Eugene Batchelder, *A Romance of the Sea-Serpent: or The Ichthyosaurus; also, a Collection of the Ancient and Modern Authorities, with Letters from Distinguished Merchants and Men of Science* (Cambridge, 1850), 5.

15. Jennifer L. Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (University of California Press, 2014), 6.

16. “The wonder of the sea!: The Gymnetrus Northumbricus, or sea-serpent, caught on the Northumbrian Coast, March 26th, 1849” (London, c. 1850). Oversize ephemera, box 34, Wellcome Collection, London.

17. “The Celebrated Sea-serpent of 1848, as Viewed from the Deck of ‘The Daedalus,’” *The Illustrated London News*, October 28, 1848, 29.

The Wonder of the Sea!



THE
GYMNETRUS NORTHUMBRICUS,
OR
SEA-SERPENT,

Caught on the Northumbrian Coast, March 26th, 1849---its dorsal Fin resembling a Mane, and its Head surmounted with a Crest like that of a Cockatoo,--

IS NOW EXHIBITING
AT THE
COSMORAMA ROOMS,
209, REGENT STREET.

THIS extraordinary Fish is an entirely new species of a very rare genus, and is not noticed in any of the standard works on Ichthyology. The Tyneside Naturalists in their recent report upon it to the Natural History Society, make the following statement:--

"The occasional appearance of this Fish to the Norwegian Fishermen, may very materially have tended to keep up among them the faith which they hold in the existence of a Great Marine Serpent."--VIDE, PRINTED REPORT.

It will be Exhibited and Described to Visitors by Mr. HINGSTON. An immense OIL PAINTING presents its Appearance when First Seen in the Water; a lesser one Illustrates its Internal Structure; and

**ONE OF THE FISHERMEN WHO CAUGHT IT
WILL BE PRESENT IN THE ROOM.**

Admission, ONE SHILLING.

THE EXHIBITION OPEN FROM TEN TILL DUSK.

R. S. FRANCIS, Printer, 25, Museum Street, Bloomsbury.

FIGURE 1. "The wonder of the sea!: The *Gymnetrus Northumbricus*, or sea-serpent, caught on the Northumbrian Coast, March 26th, 1849" (London, c. 1850). Oversize ephemera, box 34, Wellcome Collection, London.

compulsive insertion of the ship casts the craft as the vehicle for the act of eyewitnessing, but also for the transmission of that empirically derived knowledge back to the metropole, back to the London of the *Illustrated London News*, whose pages hosted the representation. The ship is the critical link in the chain of transmission, without which the creature would recede from the cold light of empirical experience into the murky waters of the fabulous.

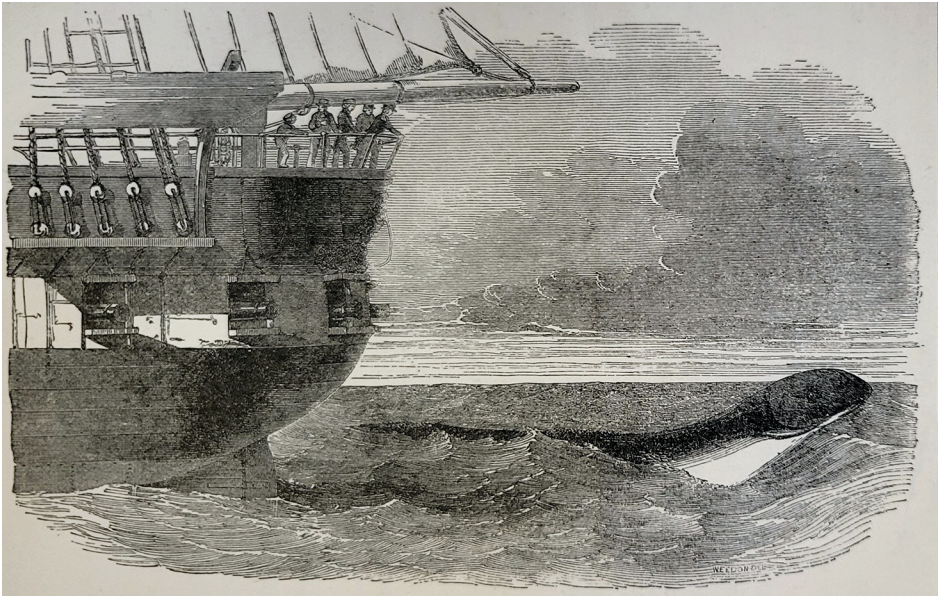


FIGURE 2. John Talfourd Smyth after Edwin Weedon, *The Celebrated Sea-serpent of 1848, as Viewed from the Deck of "The Daedalus,"* wood engraving. *Illustrated London News*, October 28, 1848. Object in the public domain; photograph by the author.

This engraving, rich as it is, is merely one part of the highly saturated evidentiary tableau constituted by the handbill. The bill also includes a reference to an item in a scientific journal, *Transactions of the Tyneside Naturalists' Field Club*: a report delivered by two Newcastle ichthyologists.¹⁸ Visitors were also tantalized with the promise of two oil paintings: an "immense" one presenting the beast's "appearance when first seen in the water," and a second, smaller one depicting the creature's internal structure. This pair of images, taken together, implicitly attests to the provenance of the specimen. It shows how it appeared while contentedly immersed in its native medium, but also as an object removed from this domain and subjected to the naturalist's ruthless scalpel. Nearly the full arc of its existence within this exhibition complex is synoptically presented by the two images.

The second picture must be the one now labeled *Painting of Internal Anatomy of Ribbon Fish, Cullercoats, 1849*, which survives in the Hancock Museum in Newcastle (figure 3). The namesake of that institution, Albany Hancock, was a prolific publisher and impresario for the development of natural history institutions in the region and is the unnamed "Tyneside naturalist" quoted in the handbill. Hancock was also a key link in the chain that ended in the paintings. He was the nearest

18. Albany Hancock and Dennis Embleton, "Account of a Ribbon Fish (*Gymnetrus*) Taken off the Coast of Northumberland," *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* 4, no. 19 (July 1849): 18.



FIGURE 3. Abraham B. van Worrell, *Internal Anatomy of a Bank's Ribbon Fish*, 1849. Great North Museum: Hancock, UK North East Museums / Bridgeman Images.

authority to the fishing village of Cullercoats, where on March 26, 1849, the trawler belonging to Bartholomew Taylor docked. The trawler's fatally wounded captive was taken to the town of Tynemouth, then North and South Shields, finally arriving the following day in Newcastle, the regional scientific hub, where Hancock and his brethren examined the specimen. They noted that it had been brutally treated by the many hands through which it had passed since its arrival on land. With fins torn by this rough passage, the specimen moved unceremoniously from dock to dissecting table, suffering further injury in transit.

This painting, *Internal Anatomy of a Bank's Ribbon Fish*, was executed by the Newcastle animal painter Abraham van Worrell, whose experience depicting little-known fauna—most notably a giraffe belonging to George IV—provided him an ideal résumé for this task.¹⁹ It is evident that Worrell had relied upon a drawing that Hancock made during his dissection of the *Gymnetrus*, which was reproduced as a full-page plate accompanying the Hancock's publication of his findings (figure 4). Even in this engraving, one senses Hancock's reservations about the intricacies of the transmission of visual knowledge about the creature on display, particularly when the specimen was obviously incomplete. In his explanation of the plate, he notes his visual strategy for indicating this challenge: "The dotted lines on the crest and ventral processes represent these parts as they are believed to have been originally, the continuous lines represent them as they were seen by us."²⁰ This strategy was necessitated by the physical maltreatment of the specimen, but Hancock suggests in his text a source of symmetrical concern: the figurative marring of the creature by artists who had never seen the object of their representation.

This anxiety was likely further inflamed by Hancock's own research into the creature, during the course of which he received a copy of a sketch of a similar organism reposing on a beach in Cornwall. This specimen had been disfigured

19. Caroline Grigson, *Menagerie: The History of Exotic Animals in England* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

20. Hancock and Embleton, "Account of a Ribbon Fish," 18.

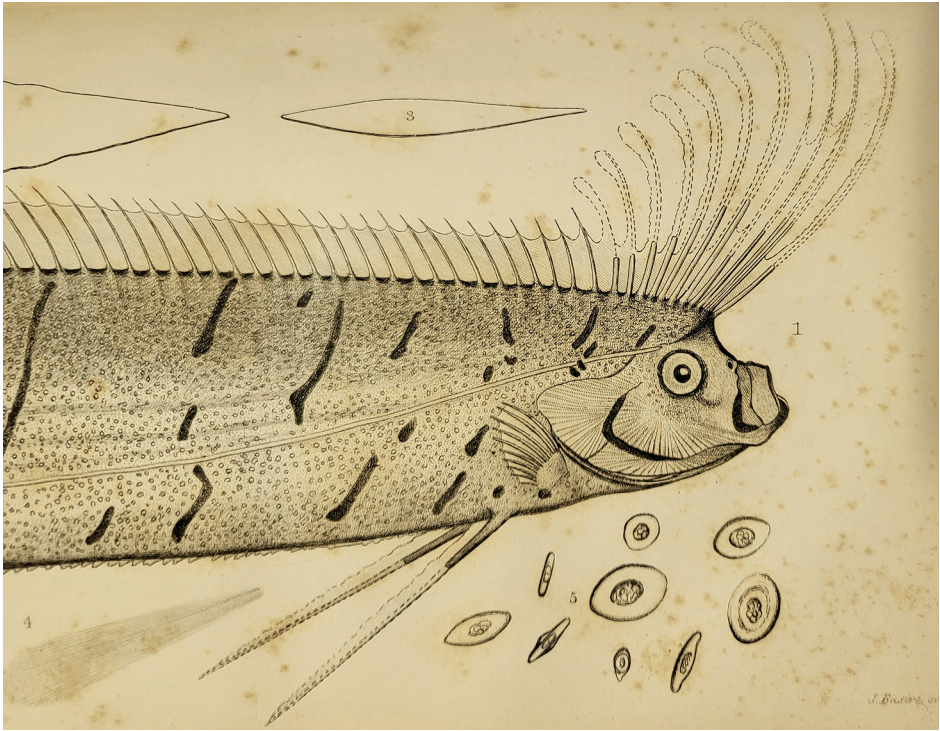


FIGURE 4. James Basire [3rd?], after Albany Hancock, *Ribbon Fish* (*Gymnetrus*). From *The Annals and Magazine of Natural History*, 1849. Object in the public domain; photograph by the author.

by the churning surf and had its tail severed. In the course of several generations of copying, one intervener had taken it upon himself to supply the missing anatomical feature, with grave consequences (figure 5). As Hancock's correspondent would recall, "The acknowledged imperfection of portions of this fish appears to have been deemed a sufficient warrant for the exercise of the imagination in persons who had not seen the original, but who undertook to form a likeness according to what they supposed it ought to be."²¹ Being untutored in the intricacies of ichthyology, the artist had supposed it ought to be something like a commonplace fish. "The tail of the fish was stated to be injured," the writer noted, "and the artist left probably to finish the drawing according to his own judgment, formed the tail like that of fishes in general." Indeed, as the correspondent wryly noted, "The artist has supplied the deficiency of a tail by something which bears a resemblance to the same part in the common

21. Jonathan Couch, "Riband Fishes of the Genus *Gymnetrus*," *Intellectual Observer; Review of Natural History, Microscopic Research and Recreative Science* 2 (1863): 3.

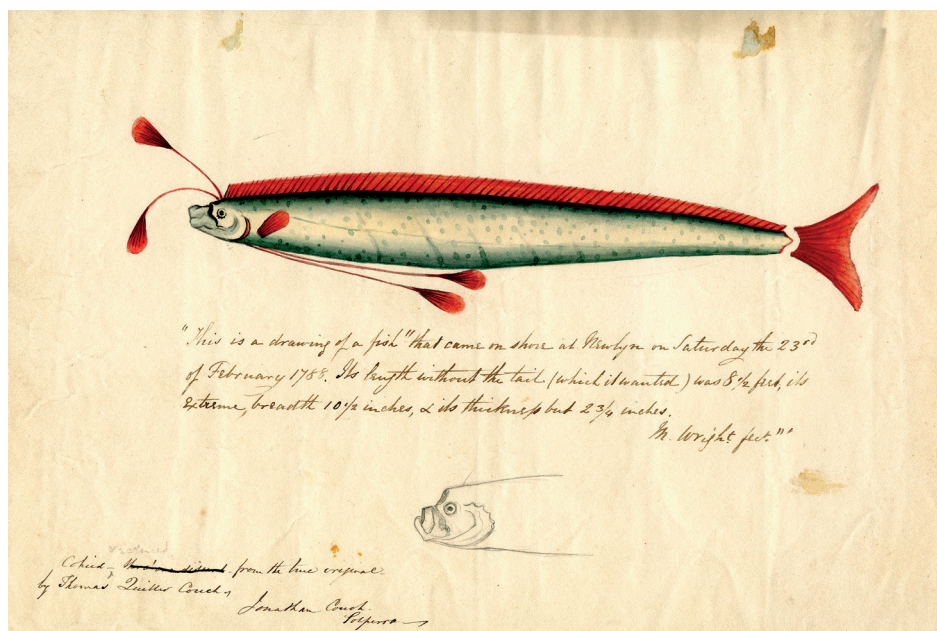


FIGURE 5. Thomas Quiller Couch, after M. Wright. *Gymnetrus*, 1849. Great North Museum, Hancock, UK. North East Museums / Bridgeman Images.

sea-bream," a staple of Cornish gastronomy but hardly a mysterious denizen of the deep.²² Others who had not seen the original, or who had seen it only in an attenuated form, whether they were an imaginative artist or a learned naturalist, were outside the chain of custody that was increasingly compulsory.

This lack helps us to understand the prominence accorded to another kind of guarantor, one whose status as a "link" in this chain would have been comparatively highly valued. The size and boldness of the typeface makes clear the element of the exhibition's evidentiary constellation to which special attention is due. The final offering on this bill of fare is "one of the fishermen who caught [the sea serpent]," who was to be present in the room. The mariner—presumably Taylor or one of his two sons, who had helped to reel in the creature—was soon praised by *The Theatrical Journal* for giving "a very novel description of its playfulness in the water, and the difficulty he had for hours of getting it on shore."²³

Nonetheless, no amount of eyewitness testimony could convince the comparative anatomist and paleontologist Sir Richard Owen of the existence of something unverified by his own methods of certification. Though generally irascible, he became

22. William Yarrell, *A History of British Fishes: Illustrated by 500 Wood Engravings* (London, 1841), 2.

23. "Metropolitan Theatres," *Theatrical Journal* 10, no. 493 (May 1849): 162.

especially agitated on the subject of the sea serpent, whose sightings he reckoned to be the products of men “deceived by a cursory view of a partly submerged and rapidly moving animal.”²⁴ Indeed, he dismissively proclaimed that “a larger body of evidence, from eye-witnesses might be got together in proof of ghosts than of the sea-serpent.”²⁵

Owen’s view was, however, in tension with the special epistemic authority enjoyed by mariners at this time, derived in part from the particular visual acuity with which texts like “On the Competency of a Marine Witness” had ennobled them. By virtue of their intrepid journeys and the variety of unusual empirical experience which they consequently underwent, seamen were accorded outsize status, quite independent from their social rank. As Philippa Hellawell has shown, “the seamen’s authority derived from their direct experience of novel and remote phenomena,” which was “translated into a form of ‘expertness’ that rendered seamen trustworthy and credible observers and thinkers.”²⁶

A sympathetic review of the exhibition conveys this privilege, reflecting that “a majority of our professors and curators would not know a whale from a porpoise, a porpoise from a shark, a shark from an ichthyosaurus.” Rather, the reliable source of knowledge was “the mariner, the whaler, the harpooner, the porpoise-shooter, the practical fisherman,” unlettered men “whose sight is sharpened by use, whose book is nature, whose knowledge is practical, and whose evidence on such a subject is far better than any other.”²⁷ The ideal source—like the fisherman—would harbor not only the empirical experience of the phenomenon in question but also the experience of having served himself as a link in the chain of the material transmission of the specimen on view.

The integrity of this chain was subtly linked directly to the engagement of the exhibition’s audience. A contemporaneous pamphlet featured an account of the beast, “narrated by the fisherman who took it, and whose very words and phrases we have generally adopted.” It recounts a moment when the custody of the specimen is temporarily ceded and as a result the chain nearly breaks. Taylor relates that he was obliged to deposit the creature upon the shore while he brought his more quotidian cargo of fish to the market. When he did so, a motley assortment of brutish villagers seized the chance to examine the beached animal. “No one being there to protect the fish,” he asserts, “it received very rough handling from the unrestrained curiosity of the crowd, and portions of the dorsal and ventral fins were much damaged and broken.”²⁸

24. “The Great Sea Serpent,” *Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle* (December 1848): 663. On Owen’s hostility to the existence of such creatures, see Brian Regal, “Richard Owen and the Sea-Serpent,” *Endeavour* 36, no. 2 (2012): 65–68.

25. Edward Newman, “The Great Sea Serpent,” *Westminster Review* 50 (1849): 510.

26. Philippa Hellawell, “‘The Best and Most Practical Philosophers’: Seamen and the Authority of Experience in Early Modern Science,” *History of Science* 58, no. 1 (2020): 28–50.

27. Newman, “The Great Sea Serpent,” 492.

28. J. J., *An Account of the Rare Fish Regalecus Glesne, Caught Off Cullercoats, on the 26th of March, 1849* (London, 1849), 6–7.

This crowd, scorned for its lack of restraint, serves as the sinister counterpoint to the behavior expected of the audience in the Cosmorama Rooms. The intactness of the object on display requires that the audience probe in a proper way. The sea serpent's exhibitionary apparatus was profoundly concerned to elicit and enshrine a specific mode of engagement on the part of its viewers. In demonstrating the primacy of firsthand experience, in diminishing the absolute authority of gentlemen and experts, and in castigating improper handling of the specimen, it imparted to viewers an account of its own participatory mode of persuasion.

Witnesses: in Writing and in Person

The exhibition in the Cosmorama Rooms made it clear that the empirical experience of the oceangoing man was a more reliable source of knowledge than that furnished by landlubbing experts, dryly cloistered in their libraries. The presence of the fisherman at the exhibition is but one instance of a much broader emphasis on the role of participant-eyewitnesses in certification. Written testimonials, offered by men of standing, maintained their presence in the mix of supporting materials, but they were ever more frequently eclipsed by modes that prioritized the involvement of paying visitors in assessing veracity.

One cannot help but recall Bentham's hostility to the inertness of written testimony in the courtroom when examining an exhibition mounted some twenty years earlier, in which a different kind of specimen was transmitted from abroad. In that case, an altarpiece putatively by the Spanish Baroque master Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, measuring seven feet square, found a congenial temporary home at the renowned Egyptian Hall in 1826, in the hope that it would attract a suitable buyer. The pamphlet that the proprietors printed to accompany the reputed masterpiece is considerably more concerned with the picture's provenance than with any of its formal attributes or aesthetic accomplishments. Typically, the pamphlet, *Brief Description of the Picture . . .*, seeks to establish the work's authenticity with reference to an account of its transmission. Yet its reliance on a complex apparatus of written testimonials has the paradoxical effect of pushing the exhibition-goer further away from the object's origins, of amplifying the alienation that the sea serpent show had so effectively removed.

The text asserts that "the proprietor contents himself with annexing a certificate, confirmatory of the authenticity of the picture." This is not precisely accurate, though, since appended to the pamphlet is, rather, a "TRANSLATION OF THE CERTIFICATE (The original of which, in Spanish, may be seen if required), AUTHENTICATING THE PICTURE OF ST. ANTONIO TO BE THE WORK OF MURILLO." The certificate concedes that while "it has not been possible to ascertain the antiquity of this picture, or the number of years it has been in our possession," it is undoubtedly a work by Murillo. This document is signed by its author, Fr. Pedro Maria de Harcales, and three of his brethren, in Cadiz, on October 18, 1825. The friar, "ex-lecturer, and now Guardian of this Convent of Capuchins" certifies that the canvas was sold to a Mr. Flinter in the year 1822.

Immediately following the certification by the holy men is a more secular source of authority: “We, the undersigned, British merchants of the City of Cadiz, certify, that to our certain knowledge, the above signatures . . . are their true signatures and hand-writing; and that all faith and credit should be given thereto, as well in judicial as extra-judicial cases.” Finally, a consular attestation appears, certifying the authenticity of the signatures of the three men, “merchants of known respectability, established in this City, whose assertions deserve full faith, both in and out of judicature.” The Consul, J. M. Brackenbury, signs and seals his certification.²⁹

We have, then, an evidentiary chain comprising these links: a printed, textual representation of the signature and seal of a consular official, who certifies the moral character and signatures of three merchants, who in turn certify the signatures of four Capuchins, who have certified that a painting formerly in their possession was sold in 1822 to a Mr. Flinter. The most proximate link refers, through other intervening links, back to the one most distant from the exhibition but nearest to the place from which the altarpiece was removed. Each of the three testimonies makes necessary causal reference to that which comes before it, but these culminate not in the person of one of these witnesses but merely in the text of the pamphlet provided at the exhibition.

Whatever certification the procedure offered, it was, in the end, insufficient to satisfy the marketplace within which the Murillo was being evaluated. A letter from the Egyptian Hall’s management to the picture’s owner, a Mr. Green, touts a publicity blitz, of which the pamphlet was but one element. In addition, the management printed “cards and advertisements” and “employed boardmen to parade the streets.”³⁰ Notwithstanding these efforts, a buyer was not found, and the management of the hall demanded that the wall-devouring altarpiece be immediately withdrawn to make way for another spectacle.

In the alternative, exhibitions like the one in the Cosmorama Rooms, with its human attendants, supplied many of the advantages that Bentham accorded to oral testimony. “How useful it is to confront witnesses,” he wrote, “to press them with unexpected questions, to seize the truth.”³¹ In some instances, contests between competing exhibitions on the same theme were settled by means of this mode of evidence. This is apparent in the slew of exhibitions that arose around the Crimean War of the 1850s, a conflict that was notable for the volume and intensity of media coverage that it garnered.³² Regular dispatches from journalists in the field, often accompanied by visual representations based upon photographs, linked metropolitan readers

29. *Brief Description of the Picture, a Grand Altar-Piece, from the Capuchin Convent at Cadiz, Representing the Adoration of St. Antonio of Padua, Painted by Murillo, Which Is Now Exhibiting at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly* (London, 1826), 6–9.

30. Letter to Mr. Green, November 15, 1826, F58/1, George Lackington Letter Book, Herefordshire Archive and Records Centre.

31. Bentham, *A Treatise*, 198.

32. Ulrich Keller, *The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War* (Routledge, 2013).

and viewers to the theater of war in newly vivid ways. These low-priced accounts established an elevated baseline of immediacy, which no doubt placed pressure on exhibitors to enhance their offerings beyond what could be purchased from the corner newsagent.

Standards applied to the certifying value of eyewitness accounts grew ever more exacting. When a new model depicting the siege of Sevastopol appeared at the Hanover Square Rooms, it differed markedly from the scene presented by a competing and highly praised exhibit at Leicester Square.³³ A correspondent for the *Athenaeum* found the Hanover Square example to be “not very correct,” owing to the fact that its source, a Signor Tenicia, had lived in the strategic port city of Sevastopol some twenty years earlier, “when the town, we take it, was not exactly the Sevastopol taken by the allies.”³⁴

Timeliness thus was essential in the quickening pace of this media environment. It helped to distinguish someone who had merely viewed the location at some time from one who had also witnessed the historical events unfolding. But even representations that observed this demand left something to be desired. For instance, eight months into the hostilities, in 1854, the Royal Gallery of Illustration presented a diorama of Sevastopol and its fortification, based upon “the Admiralty Drawing by Lieut. Montagu O’Reilly, R.N.” (figure 6).³⁵ This officer’s drawings simultaneously served as the basis for engravings appearing in the *Illustrated London News*, an outlet whose competitive advantage was the rapidity with which it disseminated such images. While O’Reilly’s imprimatur as a witness in the field conferred a degree of reliability on the images, they remained insusceptible to further interrogation and solicited no specific mode of participation from their audience. That opportunity came a year later, when a *Model of Sevastopol* was supplemented by “a Descriptive Lecture by a wounded Artilleryman from the Crimea, every fifteen minutes” (figure 7).³⁶ If Lieutenant O’Reilly had seen and recorded the city’s features, this enlisted man had participated directly in the event of the battle, and had endured bodily suffering as a result.

Yet this exhibition went even further, finally extending the centrality of—and the capacity for—witnessing to the audience itself. The handbill touting the model patriotically noted that “Soldiers are welcome at all times to view the Exhibition Free of Charge.” The result of this magnanimity was that “In three Weeks [the Model]

33. *Description of a View of the City of Sevastopol, the Assaults on the Malakhoff and the Redan, the Retreat of the Russians to the North Side of the Harbour, &c.*, Dioramas, box 3 (77), Leicester Square, John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephamera, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

34. *Athenaeum*, March 10, 1855, 297. See also Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), 497–98.

35. *Sevastopol, with all its Fortifications . . .*, 1854, Dioramas, box 5 (23), Royal Gallery of Illustration (14 Regent Street, Pall Mall), John Johnson Collection.

36. *Model of Sevastopol*, October 22, 1855, Dioramas, box 1 (74), Sevastopol, John Johnson Collection.

Royal Gallery of Illustration,
14, Regent Street, Pall Mall.

SEBASTOPOL,
WITH
ALL ITS FORTIFICATIONS,
(From the Admiralty Drawing by Lieut. MONTAGU O'REILLY, R.N.,
of H.M.S. "Retribution.")
ALSO,
THE FORTIFIED TOWN OF
SILISTRIA,
AND CITY OF
ODESSA,
ARE NOW ADDED TO THE
GRAND NEW DIORAMA,
ILLUSTRATING THE
DANUBE & BLACK SEA

Afternoon, 3 o'Clock. Evening, 8 o'Clock.
Doors open Half-an-Hour before each Representation.
Omnibuses from all parts of London pass the Gallery every five minutes.

Admission, ONE SHILLING.
STALLS, 2s. RESERVED SEATS, 3s. Children, Half-Price.

Printed by T. BRETTLE, Rupert Street, Haymarket.

12 June 1854

FIGURE 6. *Sebastopol, with all its Fortifications . . . Dioramas 5 (23).*
Printer: Brettell, Thomas, fl. 1826-1867, Rupert Street, Haymarket,
London, 1854. John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian
Library, University of Oxford.

has been visited by nearly thirty thousand persons. Among whom have been many who have been eye witness to the scene represented, who testify to the correctness of the Model." The certifying activity of eyewitnessing takes place not only in the theater of battle but also in the space of exhibition, and the "model" refers alternately and ambiguously not only to the actual Sebastopol on the Black Sea but also to its

22 Oct 1855

Open from 11 in the Morning till 10 at night.

MODEL OF Sebastopol

Which in three Weeks has been visited by nearly
Thirty Thousand Persons.
Among whom have been many who have been eye
witness to the scene represented, who testify to the
correctness of the Model, its

SIEGE WORKS and *Fortifications.*

THE FORTS & BATTERIES

ARE MOUNTED WITH UPWARDS OF

3000 Pieces of Brass Cannon.

A Descriptive Lecture by a wounded
Artilleryman from the Crimea,
EVERY FIFTEEN MINUTES.

ADMISSION 1d.

TO ALL PARTS OF THE ROOM.
*Soldiers are welcome at all times to visit the
Exhibition Free of Charge,*
"GOD SAVE THE QUEEN."

TRESNEDDER, Printer, 23, Great Russell Street, Covent Garden.

FIGURE 7. *Model of Sebastopol*. Dioramas 1 (74). October 22, 1855. John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

representation on the Thames. The transfiguration of eyewitnesses into audience members helped to close the distance between the two sites, aligning the knowledge-producing activity of the field with that of the metropole. It sought to make the audience itself the final link in the secure chain of transmission and, ultimately, the apotheosis of an entire exhibitionary system concerned with making meaning and fashioning subjects.

These efforts were rarely so successful, and practical and philosophical challenges would continue to manifest throughout the century. Firsthand and mediate witnessing endured as competing paradigms, with the relative prestige of each determined by the knowledge demanded by the discourse or situation. As one historian has put it, “The tension between the speculative knowledges of the cabinet and the mobile knowledge of the field remained in evidence throughout the nineteenth century.”³⁷

Even if its advantages were fully realized only on occasion, this variety of exhibition betrays an ambition at the center of the period’s concerns. Historian of science James Secord has persuasively argued that “questions of trust, testimony, and communitarian objectivity are simultaneously questions of how knowledge travels, to whom it is available, and how agreement is achieved.”³⁸ These questions were of great consequence to a polity that stretched ever further beyond view. This is the epistemic ambivalence of the period: finite observers in a seemingly infinite world, dependent on intermediaries to know the world while also relying upon a newly enfranchised self as the ultimate assessor of that knowledge. A fundamental inquiry for this era was into how the eyes of others—and those of new kinds of subjects—were trusted to furnish users with knowledge about the world. Viewing the exhibitions of this culture in a historically specific way reveals the centrality of these dramas and anxieties.

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37. Felix Driver, “Distance and Disturbance: Travel, Exploration and Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 14 (2004): 82.

38. James A. Secord, “Knowledge in Transit,” *Isis* 95, no. 4 (2004): 661.